

***No Woman's Land - Walking as a Dramaturgical device in performance of maternal migration***

By Rosie Garton and Ildikó Rippel (Zoo Indigo theatre company)



*'Preparing for the walk'*

**Image Credit:** *Tom Walsh*

**Introduction**

In 1945 Ildikó Rippel's grandmother Lucia was expelled from her place of birth in lower Silesia. The area was liberated by the Soviet Army and a systematic rape of German women was ordered as a retribution for the atrocities and war crimes committed by Nazi Germany. After being raped, Lucia was forced to leave her home. She walked three months through the fractured post-war landscape of Europe, dragging her two small children and all of her belongings

in a cart. In August 2015, seventy years after the end of World War II, Rosie Garton and Ildikó Rippel (Zoo Indigo theatre company) re-walked this 220-mile journey from Brzeźnica, Poland, to Pulspforde, Germany, crossing borders, climbing fences, bleeding, blistering, carrying their own children as life-size cardboard cut outs, strapped to the performers' bag packs in flat-pack form. The re-tracing of this walk produced a change of the performers' bodies, an "authentic" physicality, marked by exhaustion and the bodies' memory of the endurance. The project explored a dramaturgy of migration, the maternal body and authenticity in performance through the inclusion of real (hi)stories and the embodied experience of a migratory walk. In Zoo Indigo's performative response to the walk, *No Woman's Land* (NWL 2016), the duo re-engaged with the experienced endurance. Throughout the piece the performers (and sometimes audience members), walked on treadmills through digital projections of past and present landscapes.

This article discusses the performance walk as a methodology towards a dramaturgy of migration, enabling an authentic representation of the migrant mother through the staging of the exhausted female body, the interweaving of documentary footage, and the real act of walking.

**Insert video link:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mWJ8y202Q1M&list=UUAItripTfXYliNmUy6fbv4A&index=26>

*'Contextual trailer for the walk'*

**Video credit:** *Tom Walsh*

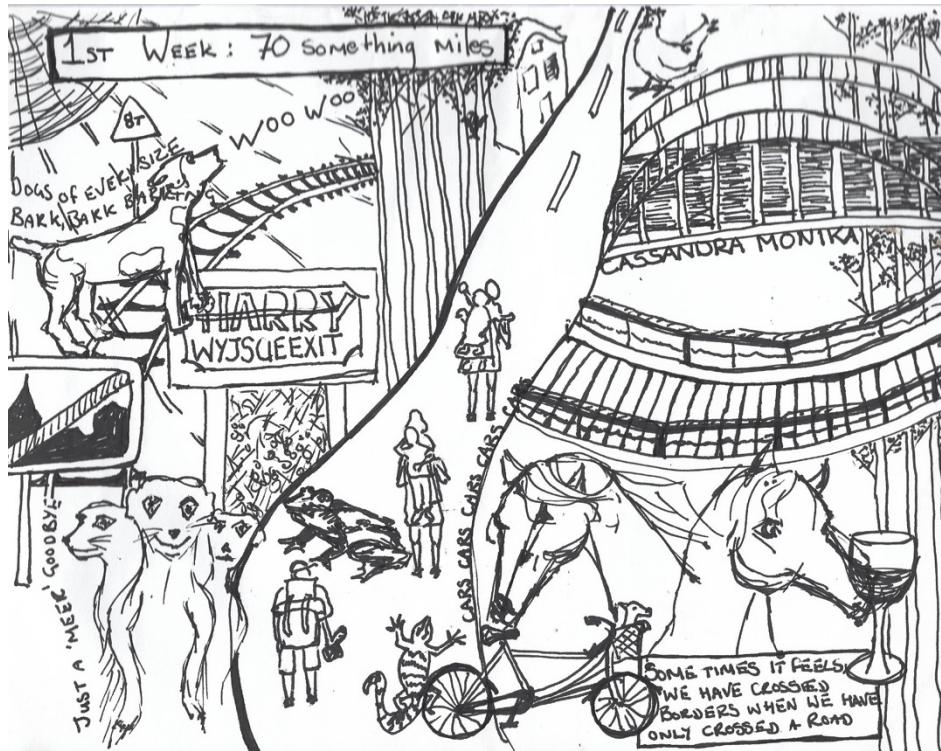
### **Re-tracing migration - a performance walk**

Walking as durational performance has been explored frequently in contemporary art practices. One of the earliest and piercingly poetic examples is *Lovers: The Great Wall Walk* (1988) by performance art couple Marina Abramovic & Ulay. The artists walked 2,500 kilometers each from opposite ends of the Great Wall of China to meet in the middle for a last embrace – to separate and end their relationship. In recent decades, the performance walk as an art form has evolved, but with practitioners such as Lone Twin and Carl Lavery establishing it as a male-led art form. Carl Lavery's *Mourning Walk* (2004), for example, explored walking as pilgrimage, to mourn his father's death in retracing a journey regularly undertaken by the father. More recently notions of gendered walking have been challenged by Dee Heddon and Cathy Turner (2012), who confront ideological notions of where and how women can navigate landscape on foot. Heddon and Turner describe women's "heroic walking" as "walking that takes place on a long-durational and geographical scale" (229) and argue "that the reiteration of a particular genealogy – or fraternity (...) generates an orthodoxy of walking, tending towards an implicitly masculinist ideology" (224). A significant number of walking women artists has emerged in the last decade to challenge this prevailing patriarchal ideology, such as Louise Ann Wilson or Simone Kenyon. Walking as pilgrimage, a therapeutic and performative act to overcome trauma, has been explored in Louise Ann Wilson's *Fissure* (2011), a response to the illness and death of her sister due to a brain tumor, and the grief caused by her loss. This performance walk, Fiona Wilkie argues, "attempts (...) to understand something of the body's fallibility and to explore ways of coping with death" (26).

In contrast to Wilson's exploration of coping with death and the body's fallibility, our research focused on the ability of the migrant maternal body to survive through physical endurance at times of crisis. Carol Martin states "much of today's dramaturgy of the real uses the frame of the stage not as a separation, but as a communion of the real and simulated; not as a distancing of fiction from nonfiction, but as a melding of the two"(2). An experiential quality was fundamental to representing Lucia's experience with a sense of the *real*. We accessed a physical understanding of *real* endurance, distance and landscape. We retraced a walk that had been undertaken previously and in this sense it became a walk back in time, or what Lavery refers to as a *ghost walk* (in Qualmann & Hind 2015). Fiona Wilkie writes that such *historical walks* offer a "framework that immediately imagines a historical relationship, establishing a dialogue between a past and a present" (26). With the aim of creating a studio performance, we were seeking secrets that we suspected could only be found in the landscapes Lucia walked through and hid in. We craved something beyond what books, journals, internet searches and familial tales could offer, an empathic connection with the past, a taste of Lucia's labour.

According to Vittorio Gallese, empathy "entails the capacity to experience what others do and yet to attribute these shared experiences to others and not to the self" (773). Gallese also uses the German word *Einfühlung*, literally meaning 'feeling into', an ability to get under the skin of the other person's perspective or experience: "For a fleeting moment I simulate your action, and in so doing I imagine that I occupy your place, that I am the vicarious agent of your movement, your experience, your utterance" (124). To gain a greater level of empathy for Lucia's migratory walk, we needed to undergo it, to pierce the

landscape with our footsteps. Mapping her journey through our bodies would create a dramaturgical map of the real as a starting point for the devising process.



**Image text:** 'Extract from Rosie's sketch diary; end of week 1'

### Performing migration – *A dramaturgy of past and present*

Our *ghost walk* was an attempt to engage in a conversation between past and present, to retrace a history of forced migration whilst considering the urgency of current refugee politics. Wilkie suggests that the inevitable merging of the *then* and *now* when retracing steps of others, allows access to significant *similarities* and *discrepancies* of the past and present (26): “When a walk enacts a retracing, it also marks out – footstep by footstep – historical changes, personal differences and cultural shifts” (Wilkie 27). As we walked we were aware of our luxuries, the hotel, the food, the occasional bubbling beverage in

a sunny beer garden. These personal differences felt vast, unfathomable. The exhaustion, dehydration, blisters, bruised toenails and swollen limbs we suffered did not compare to Lucia's experience. We were safe and fed, not fearful of being raped. Still we hurt and felt an empathy with Lucia's experience. After a long eighteen-mile walk through the flat Silesian landscape in Poland we reached our hotel, where news of the escalating refugee crisis flickered on the TV in the lobby. Unfamiliar with the language, we focused on the images – a mass of fleeing people, babies and belongings strapped in impossible shapes to exhausted and distressed bodies. Lucia walked because she was forced as a result of the shifting powers in Europe at the time. The historical resonances of the walk were brought dramatically up to date by rapid developments in the current refugee crisis, urging survival, migration, border politics and phallogocentric power structures to the forefront of the project. The past and present were stumbling into each other in a desperate and recurring cycle of war and migration.

In the making of *NWL*, documentary film was one of the dramaturgical devices we used to represent a collision of past and present and to chart a journey through unstable geographies as a result of war and migration. Documentary footage is a frequently used device instead of creating fictional scenarios or characters within dramaturgies of the real (Martin 2010: 2). Experiences of war, flight and migration are arguably non-representable through theatrical fiction, and the film footage powerfully and authentically presents these real situations. Steve Dixon argues that “in digital theatre it is often the media projection rather than the live performer that wields the real power, the sense of (...) reality” (122). Throughout the walk we filmed landscapes, spaces where borders once

were, textures underfoot, and moments of our own exhausted hysteria. We attempted to capture the endurance of retracing migration as well as the near-utopia of the present-day borderless and united Europe. In the *NWL* performance this video material was juxtaposed with documentary footage of women and children moving through a war-torn post-apocalyptic landscape in 1945. On our return from the walk, sifting through this vast amount of collected footage was a method of remembering, selecting, ordering and reflecting on previously unseen connections. Film documentation became a dramaturgical map for both the devising process and the performance structure.

The *NWL* set is formed of a white three-dimensional plywood landscape to resemble a 3D pop-up book. In an attempt to bring the audience into the landscape of the walk of both 2015 and 1945, digital animations pulsate across the set. Archival footage of refugees from 1945 is contrasted with footage of us walking through the same landscapes; videos of recent Syrian refugees also stagger through our scenography. Emulating the shifting historical border crossings that Lucia walked through and we retraced, digital media and performance text crisscrossed between *then* and *now*, between Poland and Germany, between German and English. The opposition of the refugees' desperate situation to our relative comforts sits uncomfortably while critically addressing the urgency of the current refugee crisis.





*'Rehearsal image from No Woman's Land performance'*

**Image credit:** *David Wilson Clarke*

**Excerpt from *No Woman's Land*:**

*Rosie: You are here. It's 2015, it's a hot summer's day and you are walking blissfully from Poland to Germany. You reach the river Neisse. There is a bridge and on the other side of the bridge there is another country.*

*Ildikó: You are also here. It's 1985, you are in East Germany, at the river Neisse. There's a bridge, and on the bridge the border, Stacheldraht und die bewaffnete Grenzpolizei. On the other side of the river is as another country, as far away as a distant star.*

*Rosie: You are also here. It's 1932, Weimar Germany, you're having a picnic at the river Neisse, and your children are swimming from shore to shore.*

*Ildikó: Sie sind hier. It's 1945, Niemandsland. You are escaping, pushing a pram and you arrive at the river Neisse, wanting to cross to the other side.*

*Rosie: You are still here, at the river Neisse in 1932, having a picnic. You see your sister on the other side and you call to her to join you: "Gretchen, would you like a sausage?"*

*Ildikó: Sie sind immer noch hier, 1945, you cannot cross to the other side of the river, the bridge has been bombed. You need to walk another twenty kilometers to reach the next crossing. Das Baby im Kinderwagen*



*ist ganz still, the baby has stopped breathing, the baby has died of exhaustion.*

*Rosie: You are still here, in 2015, crossing from the Polish side of the city to the German side. No interruptions, no borders checks, no passport control, so you just keep on walking.*

(Zoo Indigo 2016b 7).

### **Performing walking – *kinesthetic engagement***

Lavery discusses the complexities between histories, walking, storytelling, imagination, site and autobiography, and articulates an intimate connection between walking, writing and performing (in Mock 2009: 42). Roberta Mock further suggests that the intimate relationship between walking and performing provides a platform where “Time, space and body fold together through kinaesthesia” (Mock 2009: 10). In this sense, *walking* becomes a kinesthetic dramaturgical research device, as the act of walking is way of orientating or path-finding through a landscape, just as the dramaturg navigates through performance material. Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt’s description of dramaturgy as a process of “map-making” (180) articulates our own process of assembling the maps of landscape, history, stories and experiences into a performance work. The act of walking in the research for *NWL* provided a method of understanding a historical narrative. Dramaturgically, the act of walking became both a structural and thematic compositional tool. In the rehearsal room we made a list of opposing and colliding pairings that pushed their way to the forefront of our memories of the walk:

#### **Lucia’s walk/our walk**

Past (forced) migration/present (*forced*) migration

Motherhood/motherhood

Past landscape/present landscape

Past borders / *present crossings*  
Relentless endurance / *escapable endurance*  
Danger, fear / *aches, pains, blisters*  
Urgency/*pace*  
Walking/*walking*  
          *Walking*  
              *Walking, walking, walking...* (Zoo Indigo 2016c 15)

Our concern was with the translation of our real embodied experience of walking into the performance arena: we wanted to present a sense of authenticity with respect to a migratory walking experience. Anna Fenemore writes of a “visceral-visual” performance process (2003:110) in order to generate kinesthetic empathy from the audience.

**Insert video link:**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TPJjHl1DtVY&list=UUAItripTfXYliNmUy6fbv4A&index=29>

*‘Teaser for the No Woman’s Land performance’*

**Video Credit:** *Barret Hodgson*

Kinesthesia describes a bodily awareness of visceral sensations through touch, sight, and hearing (Reynolds and Reason 17). The empathetic experience of performance enables the audience to perceive the performance rather than read it as the spectator is chemically and physically interwoven with the performance material. Dee Reynolds suggests that emotional responses take place on a cognitive level and affective responses take a more embodied form. “To be ‘affected’ is to be moved in an embodied sense rather than in the more cognitive response, which may be implied by emotional response, for example, to a fictive character” (Reynolds 124). Fenemore suggests that bodily

sensations can be transferred between performer and audience through touch, somaticism and vision, and that this sensorial event elicits empathic engagement; “Certain somaesthetic sensations can be developed where kinesthetic sensations of movement can begin to exist *without* touch or direct physical manipulation” (Fenemore 2003: 113). To achieve this empathic transference we used treadmills, which became the stationary vehicle to explore the narrative of migration and to enable a sense of embodiment and kinesthetic empathy. The whirring machines continually pace through the 75 minutes of performance and we turns with audience members treading on their conveyor belts. White vinyl strips run across the floor from under the treadmills like pathways, used as projection surfaces for videos of moving textures of woodland and tarmac, enabling the walker on the treadmill to trudge through a past and present landscape. “The rhythms and repetitive movements on the treadmill build and converge with discordant accordion music to create tension, anxiety, threat” (McAuley). As we perform, we (along with some audience members) metaphorically pace through the time zones of 1945, 2015 and the present day on stage, exhausting ourselves to relive the strains of our own and Lucia’s walking experiences. As spectators view our physical efforts they sense our fatigue and perceive a sense of authenticity in our continued marching. The audience members who walk on the treadmills are also offered a physical understanding of the endurance of walking as part of a migratory experience. During our research, we discovered the strategies employed by women in political crises to avoid rape as systematic weapon of war. Women wore multiple layers of baggy clothing, with the hope not to appear sexually desirable. During the *NWL* performance we wrap ourselves into layer after layer, whilst

increasing the speed of the treadmills. Eventually we are running, out of breath and exhausted, sweat dripping due to the increased weight and warmth of the fabrics. The audience becomes a witness and through kinesthetic empathy perceives the physical endurance whilst sensing the urgency of escape and the challenges that women in particular face in the context of migration. Whilst the relationship between performer and audience is an “optical-visual performance” (Fenemore 4), the authentic physical exertion of the performers’ female bodies and their proximity to the audience fosters a direct kinesthetic empathy. This bodily sensation creates a “visceral-visual performance” in which the audience “can experience *visual* matter *muscularly* and be moved by visual input” (113). A feedback loop of non-acted, exhausting walking emerges with the aim of piercing representation with a trace of the real migratory experience.

As Turner and Behrndt argue, contemporary dramaturgies interrogate presence and representation and the possibility of the real within the theatrical frame (192). In *NWL* the inclusion of real (hi)stories, the integration of documentary footage and the act of walking on treadmills contribute to produce a dramaturgy of the real to authentically and viscerally represent migration. Crucially, the research methodology of the performance walk produced a form of embodied research as a basis towards a dramaturgical map for a theatre of migration, with a focus on the experience of walking women. The challenges of the walk produced an empathy with the physical demands of a situation of escape. In this instance kinesthetic empathy provides the ontological ground for historical and political knowledge in order to represent realities of migration.



*'Image from performance of No Woman's Land, running through a forest in Poland'*

**Image credit:** Luke Bigg

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